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State to spend \$2M to clean up voter rolls

Absentee ballot fraud has been an issue in Indiana

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Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles about new laws in Indiana. Read more in the coming weeks in print and at newsandtribune.com.

Indiana's bloated voter registration rolls, which officials say make elections more susceptible to fraud, will soon come under more scrutiny by the state.

The Indiana Secretary of State's office will spend more than \$2 million to purge the voter registration rolls in each of Indiana's 92 counties, removing the names of voters who are dead, in prison or have moved away.

County election officials are responsible for keeping the voter rolls current, but the lack of money has caused some of them to fall behind. The result: In some counties, the number of people listed on the active voter rolls is higher than the number of voting-age people who live there.

"Every duplicate name and every bad address is just an opportunity for vote fraud," said Secretary of State Connie Lawson, who asked the General Assembly to let the state take over the maintenance of the voter rolls after July 1. The money to do so was included the biennial budget, signed into law by Gov. Mike Pence earlier this month.

It's not a simple effort; the Secretary of State's office will have to send out at least two mass mailings of postcards to Indiana voters as part of a sweeping effort to verify their voting status.

The legislature was pushed into taking action by the U.S. Department of Justice. Officials with the DOJ Civil Rights Division's Voting Section found that at least 10 percent of Indiana's 92 counties have a higher number people on their active voter rolls than they do who are old enough to vote.

Also triggering the legislative action is an ongoing federal lawsuit, brought by conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch, which claims the problem is more widespread. The DOJ and Judicial Watch have raised questions about whether Indiana has failed to maintain clean voter registration lists as required by the National Voter Registration Act.

DOJ officials have declined to comment on their investigation of Indiana's voter rolls. Tom Fitton, president of Judicial Watch, said his lawsuit will continue until his organization is satisfied that Indiana is meeting federal requirements for keeping the voter registration rolls current.

"We'll have to review what the state has proposed," Fitton said. "This doesn't automatically end the lawsuit."

LOOKING BACK

Indiana has a history with the issue. In 2006, the U.S. Justice Department pushed the Indiana Election Commission into signing a consent decree in which the state agreed to work with county officials to clean up Indiana voter registration rolls. But that consent decree expired in 2009.

Indiana maintains a statewide voter registry, but each county is responsible for updating information on the voters in their county. Lawson said county elections officials find it challenging and costly to keep their voter rolls current.

"The counties have so many demands on their dollars these days," Lawson said. "Everybody is struggling for every dollar. It's easy for a county to say, 'This is one job we'll have to put off till we've got more money in bank.'"

The same law that requires accurate voter rolls, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, also makes it harder for county election officials to remove voter names, Lawson said. They need a death certificate or notice from the state health department to take a deceased person's name off the roll, for example. They have to wait for a voter to miss two presidential elections before they can start the process of verifying whether that voter is still at the address where he or she registered.

"No one wants to disenfranchise a voter by removing them too quickly," Lawson said.

ABSENCE OF CONTROLS

Lawson is sensitive to the issue of election fraud and concerns about voters having confidence in the system. There have been several high-profile criminal cases over the last year involving people who've had significant influence over voter rolls and the election process.

In April, former Democratic campaign consultant Mike Marshall was sentenced to three counts of voter fraud in Jennings County related to charges that he tampered with absentee ballots. Also in April, a longtime Democratic Party county chairman, Butch Morgan, was found guilty of forging voters' signatures on petitions to place Democratic candidates on the state primary ballot in 2008.

And Lawson was appointed to her job, as Secretary of State, after her Republican predecessor, Charlie White, was convicted on voter fraud charges related to him using his old address to cast his vote, after moving someplace else.

Bloated voter registration rolls aren't just a problem in Indiana. In February 2012, the nonpartisan Pew Center on the States released a report that said the nation's voter registration rolls are in deep disarray. Pew researchers, using information collected from states' voter rolls, found that one in eight active registrations is invalid or inaccurate. The Pew report found about 1.8 million people listed as active voters who are dead and another 2.8 million people with active registrations in more than one state.

In releasing the report, Pew officials said they didn't believe bad voter rolls were an indicator of widespread voter fraud. But they did the bloated rolls undermined voter confidence and fueled partisan disputes over the integrity of the election process.

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